

LUPITA NYONG'O

# Sulewe



ILLUSTRATED BY

VASHTI HARRISON





Sulwe

For Sekai, the newest star in our night sky

—L. N.



For Lupita

—V. H.



SIMON & SCHUSTER BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS

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WRITTEN BY

LUPITA NYONG'O



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SIMON & SCHUSTER BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS

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Sulwe was born the color of midnight.



She looked nothing like her family.  
Not even a little, not even at all.

Mama was the  
color of dawn,




Hardly anyone at school looked like  
Sulwe either.

People gave her sister, Mich, pet names  
like "Sunshine" and "Ray" and "Beauty."







Baba the  
color of dusk,

and Mich, her sister, was  
the color of high noon.

People gave Sulwe names like “Blackie” and  
“Darky” and “Night.” Sulwe felt hurt every time.

So she hid away while her  
sister made lots of friends.



Sulwe dreamed of being the same color as her sister.

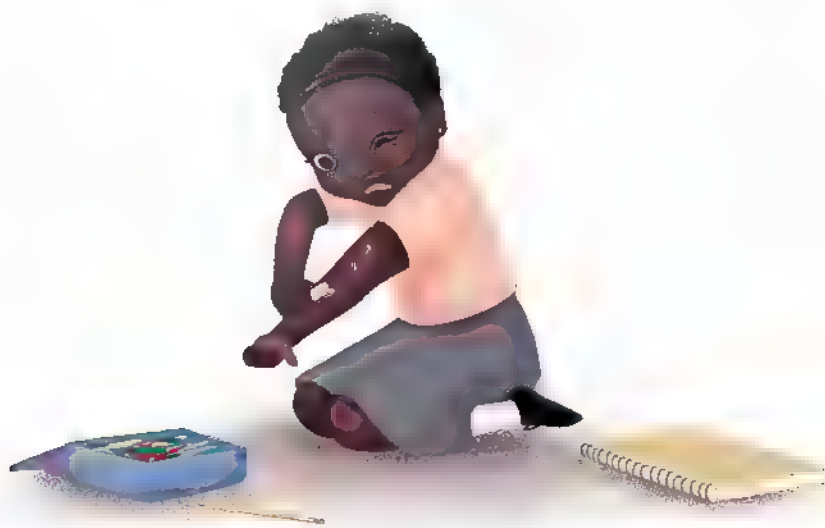
She wanted real friends too.





So she got the biggest eraser she could find and  
tried to rub off a layer or two of her darkness.

That hurt!



She crept into Mama's room

and helped herself to her makeup.

Oh no! She would hear about this from Mama.





With a stomachache, she went to bed  
early and turned to God for a miracle.

Dear Lord,

Why do I look like midnight,  
when my mother looks like dawn?

Please make me as fair  
as the parents I'm from.

I want to be beautiful,  
not just to pretend.

I want to have daylight.

I want to have friends.

If you hear me, O Lord,  
and would like to comply,  
may I wake up as bright  
as the sun in the sky.

Amen.





When Mama came in to wake  
her for school the next morning,  
Suwe rose, found not a trace  
of daylight in her midnight skin.




Suwe told Mama everything.



8/8/88





An illustration of a woman and a young girl in a hallway. The woman, on the left, has her hair in a bun and wears a yellow dress. She looks down at the girl with a sad expression. The girl, on the right, wears a light blue dress and has her hand to her face, appearing to cry. The background is a simple hallway with a door on the right.

Mama asked, "What is your name?"

"Sulwe," she muttered.

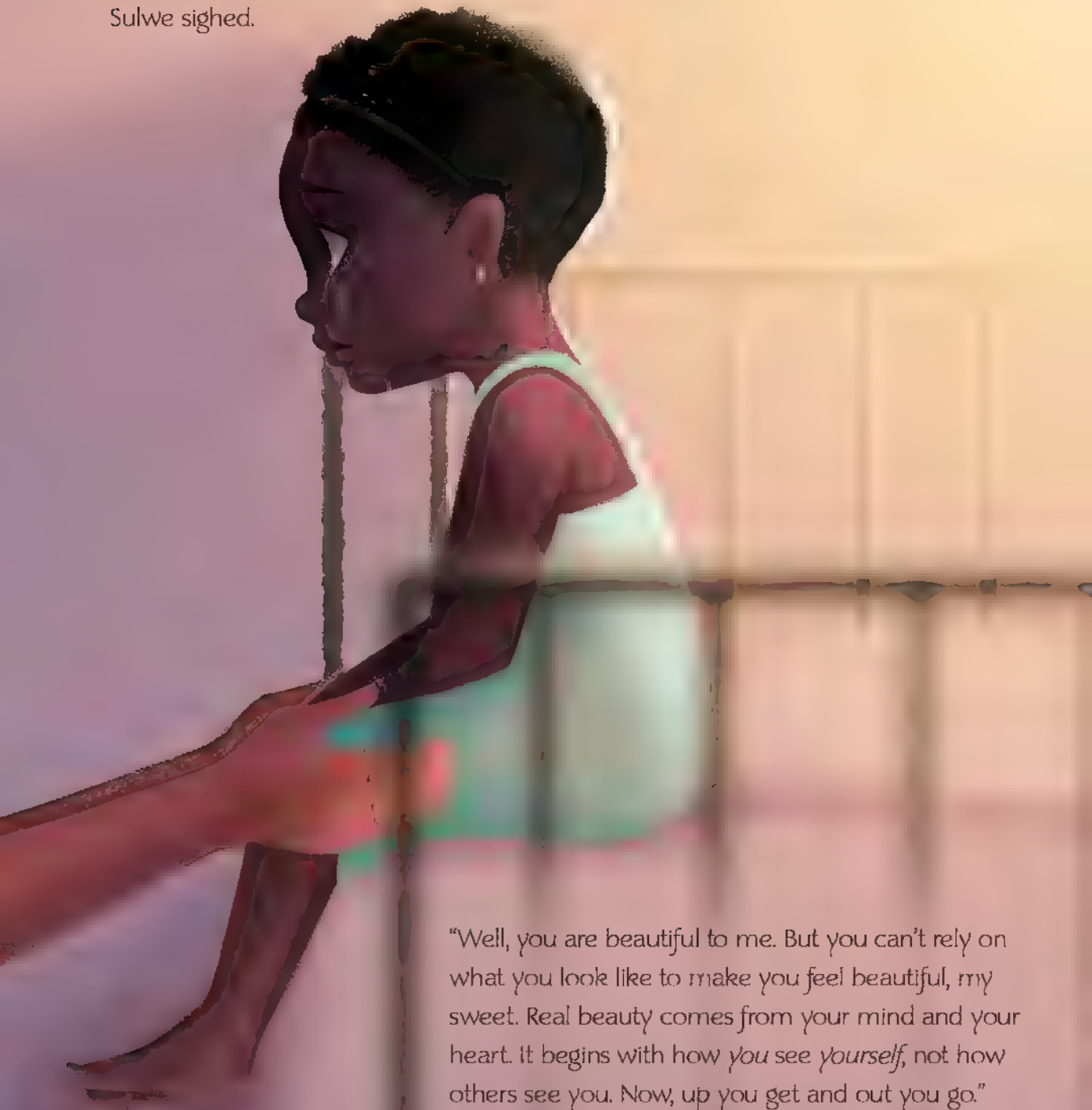
"And what does it mean?"

"Star," Sulwe whispered.



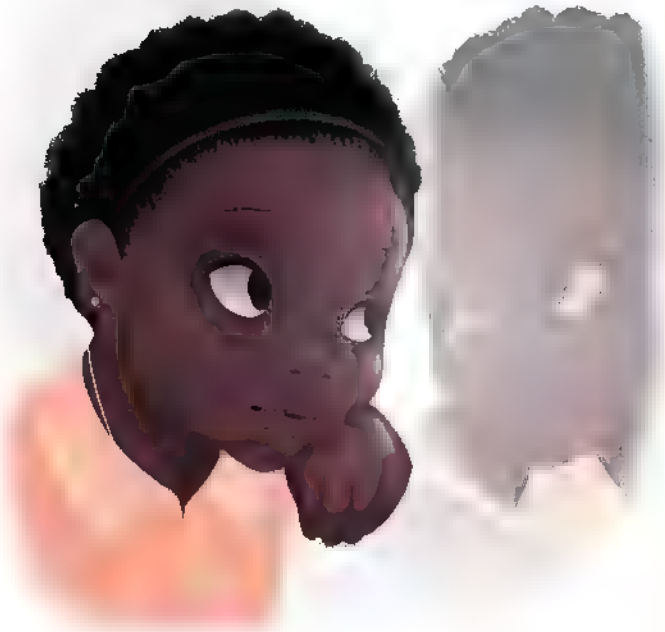
"Brightness is not in your skin, my love. Brightness is just who you are. As for beauty," Mama said, rubbing Sulwe's stomach the way she always did to comfort her. "You *are* beautiful."

Sulwe sighed.

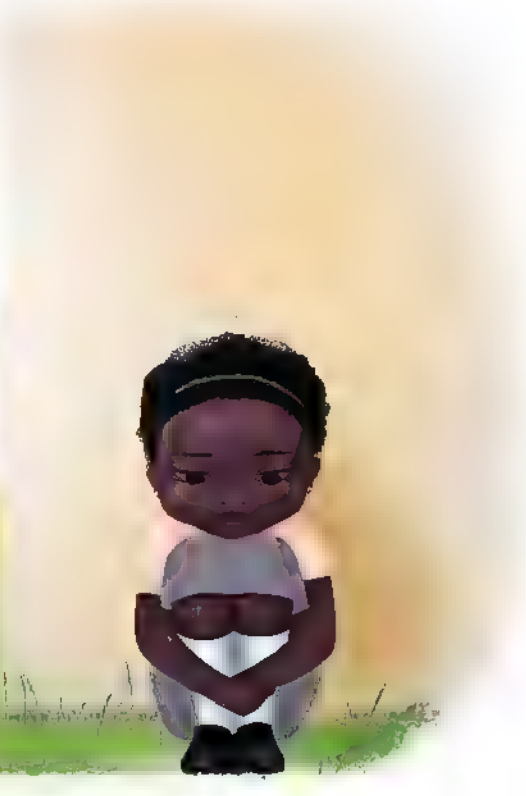


"Well, you are beautiful to me. But you can't rely on what you look like to make you feel beautiful, my sweet. Real beauty comes from your mind and your heart. It begins with how *you* see *yourself*, not how others see you. Now, up you get and out you go."

How could she, as dark as she was,  
have brightness in her?



How could she have beauty when no  
one but her mother seemed to see it?





That night, a shooting star appeared at Sulwe's window.

"The night sent me," the star said. "Come with me."



Sulwe hopped onto the  
star and off they went.





long ago, at the beginning of time, said the stars  
there was Night and Day and they were sisters.







They loved each other very much.



But people didn't treat the sisters the same.



Lovely

Nice

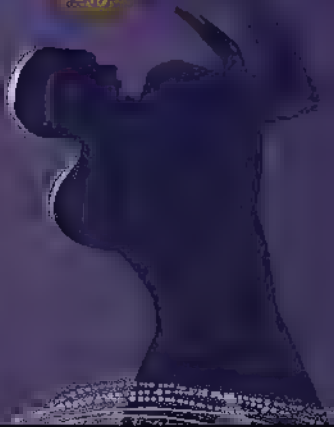
Pretty


...and all the pet names like "Lovely" and "Nice" and "Pretty"

...and all the Night names like "Scary"  
and "Mean" and "Ugly." She felt hurt  
and alone.

Well, Night got fed up and  
walked right off the earth.

Ugly





Day stayed behind and enjoyed  
making everybody happy in  
the sun.



But then Day grew *too* long.



Day began to really miss her sister.  
So did everybody else.





There had to be a way to get her back.



Day set off to find Night.



And she did!





"I miss you," said Day.

"I miss you, too," said Night. "But you don't know what it's like to be treated badly for being dark."

"You're right, I don't," Day replied. "But what I do know is that we need you just the way you are. Come and see."






Day told her sister, "When you are darkest is when you are most beautiful. It's when you are most you."

Could it be that Night did not need to change, not even a little, not even at all?





A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a pink dress, is shown in profile, dancing or moving gracefully. The background is a soft, ethereal glow of yellow and pink light, with numerous small, shimmering particles floating around her. The overall atmosphere is dreamlike and romantic.


Now that Night and Day were back together,  
a little bit of Night returned to Day in the form  
of shadows. And a little bit of Day returned to  
Night in the form of moonlight.



They were inseparable from that moment on  
and promised to celebrate the brightness in  
each other whether people chose to see it  
or not.





A stylized, textured map of the world, possibly representing a celestial body or a planet. The map is rendered in a dark, grainy style with glowing blue and yellow lines tracing paths across its surface. A bright yellow star is positioned in the upper right quadrant, with a blue beam of light extending from it towards the map. The background is a dark, starry space with several bright stars and a blue nebula-like glow in the upper left.

"You see," the star explained, "we need them both, on their sunniest day and their darkest night, and every shade in between."

"Together they make the world we know, light and dark, strong and beautiful."

Sulwe rose the next morning, beaming.

There would be no hiding anymore. She belonged out  
in the world! Dark and beautiful, bright and strong.









And if she ever needed a reminder of her brightness,  
she could look up at the sky on the darkest night to  
see for herself.



Sulwe felt beautiful inside and out!







## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Much like Sulwe, I got teased and taunted about my night-shaded skin. I prayed to God that I would wake up with paler skin. I tried all sorts of things to lighten my complexion. My mother told me often that I was beautiful, but she's my mother, of course she's supposed to think that!

It wasn't until I was much older that my feelings about my skin changed. It helped to see darker-skinned women being celebrated for their beauty. If they were beautiful, I could be too. I began to see myself differently.

While both Sulwe and I had to learn to see our beauty, I hope that more and more children begin their lives knowing that they are beautiful. That they can look to the beauty in the world and know they are a part of it.

And yet what is on the outside is only one part of being beautiful. Yes, it is important to feel good about yourself when you look in the mirror, but what is even more important is working on being beautiful inside. That means being kind to yourself and to others. That is the beauty that truly shines through.

The journey I went on was very different from Sulwe's nighttime adventure, but the lesson was the same: There is so much beauty in this world and inside you that others are not awake to. Don't wait for anyone to tell you what is beautiful. Know that you are beautiful because you choose to be. Know that you always were and always can be. Treasure it and let it light the way in everything you do.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To Mummy and Daddy, who enveloped me  
with the unconditional love that led me to my light;

to Simon Green, who saw the glow  
and knew I could write this book long before I did;

to Mollie Click, who tended to the fire  
and got me to the finish line;

to Zareen Jaffery, who fanned my flame  
and offered the sparks to keep it going;

to Vashti Harrison, who breathed life into Sulwe  
and lit the match in her eyes;

to Laurent Linn, whose keen eye trained mine  
to tell the fog from the flame, and whose knowing voice fueled mine;

to Ami Boghani, Vernon François, Dede Ayite, Liesl Tommy, Ben Kahn & K'Naan,  
who kindled my clarity by saying exactly the right thing  
at the right time;

and to *Essence* magazine & *Essence Black Women in Hollywood*,  
who granted me that moment on stage that flared this whole book into existence;

I THANK YOU FROM THE BOTTOM OF MY HEART!

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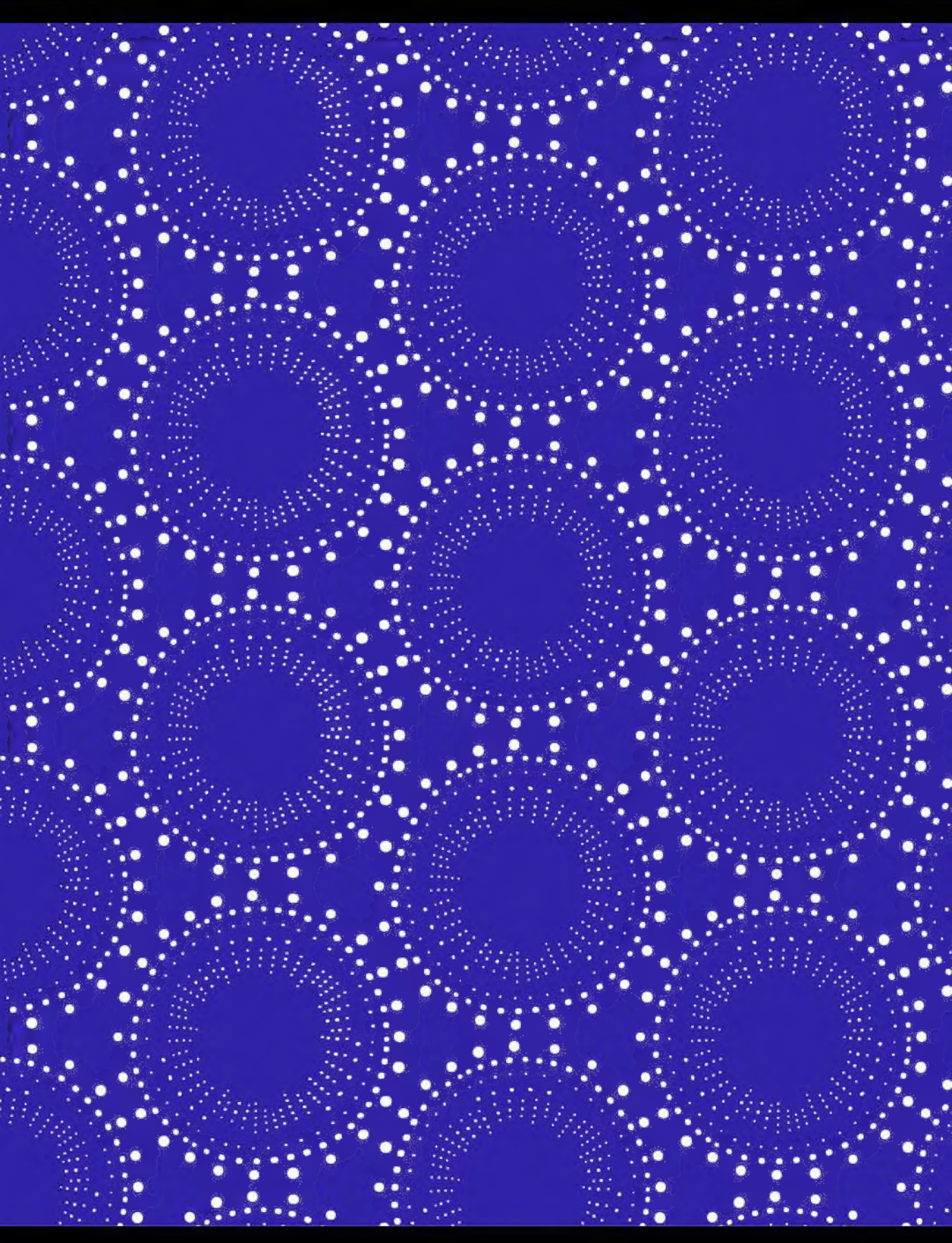
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